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ABSTRACT

For professors who have been assigned the task of teaching communication theory, carefully chosen examples of films, videos, TV clips, or music can be productively used to support instruction. Both research and experience have shown that the visual and aural channels are excellent forms of amplifying, clarifying, and justifying theoretical concepts. For example, after discussing the basic concepts, to highlight social exchange theory, play Pearl Jam's "Better Man" and REM's "Losing My Religion"--students can accurately make the application. For cognitive dissonance theory, a short clip from "Friends" which deals with celebrating Ross' birthday and lack of funds from three of the friends is an ideal exemplar of the theory. A unit on the narrative paradigm lends itself to using examples from a variety of musical genres, from country to hard rock to rap. The concepts associated with Watzlawick's interactional view can be seen in the 1994 film, "When a Man Loves a Woman." Uncertainty reduction theory is viewed by many students as among the most applicable--the very uncertainty of enrolling in the university, living away from home, selecting a major, etc. provide a rich foundation under which students come to understand this theory. (Contains 27 references, an informational appendix, a table of available films and topics illustrated, and a list of feature films that illustrate communication theory). (NKA)

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An Experiential Approach to Teaching Communication Theory: Incorporating Contemporary Media to Clarity Theoretical Concepts

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An Experiential Approach to Teaching Communication Theory: Incorporating Contemporary Media to Clarify Theoretical Concepts

Professors who have been assigned the challenging task of teaching Communication Theory have presumably experienced students who claim that theory is frustratingly abstract, difficult to conceptualize, or worse yet---boring! Kurt Lewin reminds us, however, "there is nothing so practical as a good theory" (Lewin, 1951, p. 169). In an effort to enact Lewin's premise, teachers, for decades, have put their creative skills to use and have developed innovative and invaluable teaching tools, and/or assignments centered around popular culture. The advent of music videos has enriched the repertoire of possibilities and students are responding with enthusiasm!

Certainly not all films, videos, TV clips or music can be legitimately or productively used to support instruction, however, examples which are carefully chosen and effectively processed by the instructor and students, can "bring theory to life" and thus aid in comprehension and recall. Much research has focused on the potential power and many applications of media as a supplementary resource (Aden, 1991; Aldridge, H. & Carlin, D. B. (1993); Botterbusch, 1991; Burns, 199 ; DeLoughry, 1994; Gitlin (Ed.), 1987; Jamieson & Campbell, 1992; Johnson & Vargas, 1994; Kaplan, 1987; Lowe (Ed.), 1981; Ornstein, 1990; Proctor, 1995; Proctor & Adler, 1991; Rybacki & Rybacki, 1995; Seiter, Borchers, Kreitzner, & Warth (Eds.), Shields, D.C. & Kidd, V.V. (1973); 1992; Smith, 1996; Vandergriff & Hannigan, 1993). As highlighted by Proctor & Adler (1991), among the most powerful arguments promoting the application of popular culture (specifically, film) to communication theory is presented by Shields and Kidd (1973),

> Speech communication theory attempts to explain communication in society, and film attempts artistically to reproduce communication on the screen. From this perspective,.communication theory underlies both practice and the depiction of that practice in film. Such a convergence of art and theory provides a mandate for using art forms to explicate communication theory (p. 201).

Wiemann (1996) reminds us, "Film [media] is never likely to replace more traditional methods of instruction. The clarity of a good textbook, the lectures and commentary of a talented instructor, and the contributions of motivated students are all essential ingredients in successful instruction" (p. 25). Undeniably, reading about, grappling with, and discussing the actual theories are prerequisites to the media support. Both research and experience have shown, however, that the visual and aural channels are excellent forms of amplifying, clarifying, and justifying theoretical concepts. Additionally, ease in availability of sources (I often ask my students to supply effective examples of TV clips, rock videos, and/or taped music), as well as flexibility in use, "edited in advance, played repeatedly for examination and analysis. . ." (Wiemann, 1996, p. 25) add to the appeal of media exemplars as effective classroom resources.

While many of the examples I will highlight today were developed from my own (and/or my students') repitorire of "creative thought," the appendix includes extensive listings of resources provided by others in our discipline. For example, the Instructor's Manual (Wiemann, 1996, pp. 24-27) which accompanies Looking Out/Looking In (Adler & Towne, 1996) provides a comprehensive section on "Using Feature Films In The Interpersonal Communication Course" and includes an extensive listing of films and

concepts illustrated therein. Additionally, the text itself, Looking Out/Looking In (Adler & Towne, 1996) concludes each chapter by referencing films and providing useful synopses relevant to the chapter under discussion. Similarly, Griffin's (1996) A First Look At Communication Theory, provides an equally impressive listing of films with corresponding theoretical applications.

For the purpose of today's presentation, I have highlighted five communication theories and provided details on the supplemental resources used to illustrate each.

Social Exchange Theory

After discussing the basic concepts behind this theory, I present examples of two contemporary songs, Pearl Jam's, "Better Man," and REM's, "Losing My Religion" as a means of illustration. Projecting the lyrics on an overhead screen, I play the music for the students and afterward, ask them to apply the concepts. Without exception, they have accurately made the application. In both cases, I have witnessed students' "ah ha" experience as the music is being played (See appendix).

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Once again, after processing the essential theoretical concepts), I show a short clip from the popular series, Friends. This particular clip shows the group of six as they struggle over how to celebrate friend, Ross' birthday. Any one who is familiar with the show knows that three of the friends (Ross, Monica and Chandler) are fully employed in respectable positions, while each of the other three struggle to make ends meet with full

or part-time employment (Joey, an actor; Rachel, a waitress, and Phoebe, a masseuse and would-be singer). The calamity occurs during dinner one evening when the three "poorer" friends must confront their more financially-secure friends and admit that the request to contribute to Ross' birthday gift makes them more than uncomfortable. Again, the students (many of whom had seen the segment last season) found it an ideal exemplar of the theory under discussion. Furthermore, after viewing a contemporary example which resonates, students are far more efficient in making applications to their own life experience.

The Narrative Paradigm

As a trained rhetorician, this is perhaps my favorite unit of the semester. Prior to discussing the theory in class, the students are presented with an assignment, asking them to read Fisher's theory on narrative and to carefully select either a music video or a favorite song illustrating the power of narrative fidelity and coherence. Selected examples are then brought to class the day the theory is discussed to further highlight the application. Because of our diverse student population, I attempt to select examples representing a variety of musical genres (country, hard rock, alternative, classic rock, rap, etc.). Among the most effective student selections have been the following: Reba McEntire's, "She Thinks His Name Was John, Alanis Morissette's, "Perfect," Harry Chapin's, "Taxi," and KRS's "Love Is Gonna Getcha." (See Appendix for lyrics). Rock videos which have served as effective exemplars include: Pearl Jam's, "Jeremy," Cool-E-O's, "It's Too Hot," KRS-I's, "Love Is Gonna Get Cha," Toni Braxton's, "Un-Break My Heart," and Jeff Carson's, "The Car." Additionally, contemporary movie clips from "The

Joy Luck Club" and "How To Make An American Quilt" have worked well to show the power of narrative in other contexts.

The Interactional View

Griffin's reference to the fictional "Franklin family" (a family torn apart by a son's alcohol abuse) provided the perfect stimulus for the film chosen to illustrate the concepts associated with Watzlawick's, Interactional View. Supplementing this theory with additional "systems concepts," I use the 1994 film, "When A Man Loves a Woman" starring Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia to illustrate this theoretical approach to relationships. Of the various theories discussed throughout the semester, I have found that this perspective resonates easily with my students. In brief, the movie centers around a young mother, caught up in the day-to-day stress of work and family. She works hard, but also plays hard, until her reliance on alcohol threatens to destroy her and her family. The movie vividly portrays the trauma she inflicts upon herself, her children and her husband. With the assistance of a treatment facility, she learns to cope with the addiction and is later returned to her family where she attempts to rebuild the structure of this fragile unit.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Of the many theories discussed in any given semester, Berger's Uncertainty Reduction Theory is viewed by students as among the most applicable. The very uncertainty of enrolling in the university, living away from home, negotiating with a roommate, selecting a major, failing an exam, dating, assuming employment, interviewing for a fulltime position, etc. provide a rich foundation under which students come to

understand this theory. Aside from the university context, one of my students recently applied the theoretical concepts, including the seven axioms to the film, "Scent of a Woman." Beginning with Berger's basic premise, people are motivated by a need for certainty, the student appropriately explained how the theory was brought to life through the interaction between the two main characters, Charlie and Colonel Slade. In this film, Charlie, a student from Baird Academy, lands himself a weekend job assisting a middle-aged blind man named Colonel Slade. As the film progresses, great uncertainty is reduced through personal interaction during a weekend trip to New York. The subplot of the film, an ethical dilemma at the Baird Academy, effectively illustrates concepts related to Social Exchange Theory.

Having an understanding of, and appreciation for, theory, is essential for our students attempting to master the discipline. While among the most challenging courses to teach, Communication Theory also can be among the most satisfying. Those who have experienced students excited to "find" examples and eager to share their findings, themselves, become caught up in the excitement of new-found applications. The Appendixes provided should give you a place to start. We welcome the open exchange of your ideas as well.

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APPENDIX

Proctor & Adler (1996)
Widely Available Films and Topics Illustrated

Griffin (1997)
Feature Films That Illustrate Communication Theory

Lyrics used to illustrate Social Exchange Theory
- Pearl Jam's, "Better Man," 1994, Sony Music
- REM's, "Losing My Religion," 1991, Warner Brothers

Lyrics used to illustrate the Narrative Paradigm
- Reba McEntire's, "She Thinks His Name Was John," 1994, MCA
- Alanis Morissette's, "Perfect." 1995, MCA
- Harry Chapin's, "Taxi," 1972, Electra

Videos used to illustrate the Narrative Paradigm
- KRS-One's, "Love Is Gonna Get Cha," 1990, Zomba Recording
- Pearl Jam's, "Jeremy,"1991, Epic
- Toni Braxton's, "Un-break My Heart," 1996, LaFace Records
- Jeff Carson's, "The Car," 1995, MCG/Curb

TABLE 1

WIDELY AVAILABLE FILMS AND TOPICS ILLUSTRATED

Title	Comm. Climate	Conflict	Emotions	Family	Gender	Intercult'l	Language	Listening	Nonverbal	Perception	Relational Control	Relational Stages	Self-Concept	Self-Disclosure
About Last Night (R)	X	X												
Accidental Tourist, The (PG)			X								X	X		X
African Queen, The (NR)	X	X			X									X
All About Eve (NR)		X									X	X		
Annie Hall (PG)	X	X									X			X
Avalon (PG)	X		X	X			X					X		
Beaches (PG-13)	X	X												
Being There (PG)			X				X		X	X			X	
Betrayal [1983] (R)	X	X	X						X		X	X		
Big (PG)					X		X		X					X
Black Like Me (NR)						X				X				
Breakfast Club, The (R)	X	X	X			X				X				
Breaking Away (PG)		X		X		X					X	X	X	X
Brother/Another Planet (NR)					X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X
Children of a Lesser God (R)		X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Color Purple, The (PG-13)				X										
Dad (R)	X			X				X					X	
Dangerous Liaisons (R)			X										X	
Dead Poets Society (PG)	X	X									X			X
Diary of a Mad Housewife (NR)			X		X								X	
Diner (R)	X				X									X
Do the Right Thing (R)	X	X	X			X	X	X		X		X	X	
Dominick and Eugene (PG-13)		X		X					X					
Driving Miss Daisy (PG)		X				X							X	X
El Norte (R)						X						X		
Fabulous Baker Boys, The (R)	X	X		X										
Five Easy Pieces (R)				X										X
Four Seasons (PG)	X	X	X										X	X
General, The (NR)									X		X	X		
Gods Must Be Crazy, The (NR)						X								
Good Morning Vietnam (R)							X							
Great Santini, The (PG)	X	X	X	X										
Gregory's Girl (NR)					X						X			
Her Life as a Man (NR)					X								X	
I Never Sang/My Father (PG)				X										
King Kong ['33, '76] (NR, PG)									X					

Title	Comm. Climate	Conflict	Emotions	Family	Gender	Inter-cult'l	Language	Listening	Non-verbal	Perception	Relational Control	Relational Stages	Self-Concept	Self-Disclosure
Kramer vs. Kramer (PG)		X		X	X									
Lost in America (R)	X	X												
My Fair Lady (NR)														
*M*A*S*H* (PG)	X		X				X						X	
Marty (NR)														
Mask (PG-13)				X									X	
Mr. Mom (PG)				X	X								X	X
My Life as a Dog (NR)				X						X				
Nothing in Common (PG)				X						X				
On Golden Pond (PG)				X										
One Flew/Cuckoo's Nest (R)	X	X						X					X	
Ordinary People (R)	X	X	X	X							X		X	
Parenthood (PG-13)		X		X				X	X		X		X	X
Passage to India (PG)			X			X								
Pump Up the Volume (R)	X	X	X	X			X	X			X	X	X	X
Quest for Fire (R)							X		X					
Rain Man (R)	X		X	X						X				
Rashomon (NR)														
Running on Empty (PG-13)	X	X		X										
. . .*Say Anything* (PG-13)	X	X	X	X	X			X			X	X	X	X
sex, lies, and videotape (R)			X					X						X
Shirley Valentine (R)	X	X						X				X	X	
Stand By Me (R)	X		X											
Swept Away (R)		X												
Taming of the Shrew (NR)		X			X						X			
Terms of Endearment (PG)		X		X							X			
Tex (PG)				X							X			
Tin Men (R)		X											X	
Tootsie (PG)				X	X		X		X	X				
Trading Places (R)						X	X			X				
Twelve Angry Men (NR)	X	X	X						X	X				
Unbearable Lightness . . . (R)			X											
Vice Versa (PG)				X										
War of the Roses (R)	X	X								X				
When Harry Met Sally (R)											X			
Who's Afraid/Virg Woolf (NR)	X	X	X									X		X
											X			X

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FEATURE FILMS THAT ILLUSTRATE COMMUNICATION THEORY

Verbal Messages
- The Miracle Worker (General)
- Pygmalion / My Fair Lady (General)
- The Conversation (Information Theory)
- Big (Meaning of Meaning)
- Don Juan DeMarco (Coordinated Management of Meaning)
- Nell (Symbolic Interactionism)

Nonverbal Messages
- House of Games (General)
- The Sting (General)
- The African Queen (Expectancy Violations Theory)
- North by Northwest (Expectancy Violations Theory)
- The Manchurian Candidate (Semiotics)

Cognitive Processing
- Oleanna (General)
- To Kill a Mockingbird (Constructivism)

Relationship Development
- Four Weddings and a Funeral (General)
- Brothers McMullen (Social Penetration Theory)
- Coming Home (Social Penetration Theory)
- Sleepless in Seattle (Social Penetration Theory)
- Driving Miss Daisy (Uncertainty Reduction Theory)

Relationship Maintenance
- Breaking Away (General)
- Forrest Gump (General)
- Ordinary People (Interactional View)
- Parenthood (Interactional View)
- What's Eating Gilbert Grape (Interactional View)
- Beaches (Relational Dialectics)
- Children of a Lesser God (Relational Dialectics)

Influence
- The Color Purple (General)
- Stand and Deliver (General)
- Dead Man Walking (Social Judgment Theory)
- Norma Rae (Cognitive Dissonance Theory)
- Twelve Angry Men (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

Group Decision Making
- Crimson Tide (General)
- Stagecoach [1939] (General)
- Apollo 13 (Groupthink)
- Flight of the Phoenix (Functional Perspective)
- Dead Poets Society (Symbolic Convergence Theory)
- The Dream Team (Symbolic Convergence Theory)

Organizational Communication
- Das Boot / The Boat (Information Processing Approach)
- Good Morning, Vietnam (Cultural Approach)
- Up the Down Staircase (Cultural Approach)
- Roger & Me (Critical Theory of Communication Approach)

Public Rhetoric
- Inherit the Wind (General)
- Judgment at Nuremberg (General)
- Julius Caesar (Rhetoric)
- Malcolm X (Dramatism)
- Smoke (Narrative Paradigm)

Media and Culture
- Network (General)
- Broadcast News (General)
- Medium Cool (Technological Determinism)
- WarGames (Technological Determinism)
- Avalon (Cultivation Theory)
- Being There (Cultivation Theory)
- The Year of Living Dangerously (Cultural Studies)

Media Effects
- Bob Roberts (General)
- The Candidate (General)
- All the President's Men (Agenda-Setting Function)
- Mississippi Burning (Spiral of Silence)

Intercultural Communication
- Hoop Dreams (General)
- A Passage to India (General)
- Witness (General)
- The Chosen (Anxiety/Uncertainty Reduction Theory)
- Joy Luck Club (Face-Negotiation Theory)

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Iron and Silk (Face-Negotiation Theory)
Dances with Wolves (Speech Codes Theory)
Kramer vs. Kramer (Speech Codes Theory)

Gender and Communication

When Harry Met Sally (Genderlect Theory)
Diner (Genderlect)
Steel Magnolias (Genderlect)
Fried Green Tomatoes (Muted Group Theory)
Tootsie (Muted Group Theory)
Thelma and Louise (Muted Group Theory)

Ethical Reflections

A Man for All Seasons (Messages)
Sophie's Choice (Interpersonal Communication)
Chariots of Fire (Group and Public Communication)
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (Group and Public Communication)
Absence of Malice (Mass Communication)
Quiz Show (Mass Communication)
At Play in the Fields of the Lord (Intercultural Communication)